Exactly one week after well-known “shock jock” Don Imus called the Rutgers University women’s basketball team “nappy-headed hos,” he was fired by CBS News Radio. The controversy, which simultaneously characterized the women in sexist and racist terms, targeted a team that was runner-up in the 2007 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women’s basketball championship. That Scarlet Knights team included eight women of color and two white women. Women’s rights and civil rights organizations immediately came to the Scarlet Knights’ defense. National Organization for Women president Kim Gandy joined civil rights activists like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton to stand in solidarity with the National Congress of Black Women and the National Council of Negro Women to demand termination of Imus’s radio show.

This moment of convergence—the simultaneous attention to race and gender—produced solidarity instead of the Oppression Olympics and its attendant Leapfrog Paranoia, Willful Blindness, Defiant Ignorance, Movement Backlash, or Compassion Deficit Disorder. Demonstrating the best of coalition politics, leaders of both communities acknowledged the dual causes of this episode—racism and sexism; sexism and racism. This analysis allowed for people who believe in either form of equality (or both!) to join in a unified effort to oust Imus. This moment of convergence, produced in part by the recognition of Categorical Multiplicity, a term I define later, represents a taste of what intersectionality can bring to our public discourse about race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in American politics.

Unfortunately, Imus’s period of contrition included a $20 million contract settlement and a new contract with ABC Radio only months later. Clearly, Categorical Multiplicity is necessary but not sufficient to turn the page for good. Likewise, the call for attention to Categorical Multiplicity is a long-standing part of intersectionality...
research—but intersectionality doesn’t end there. This chapter will outline five aspects of an intersectional approach to politics that can thwart the lure of the Oppression Olympics. In contrast to the debilitating Oppression Olympics, intersectional approaches provide new ways for the privileged to stand in solidarity, foster egalitarian coalition building among groups, and enhance our attention to complexity in politics. We will return to these factors in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Most Americans recognize that race and class are socially defined concepts with little to no biological meaning. Gender and sexual orientation, on the other hand, remain categories with presumptions of biology implicated as justifications for how people are treated.\(^1\) Intersectionality scholars analyze all four categories as social constructions that retain political influence far beyond any actual meaning of the biological, phenotypical, and chromosomal differences among us. Many scholars recognize this claim as a constructivist one—based on the conviction that humans cognitively construct the world around them in order to best navigate a complex society.

While intersectionality starts with this constructivist premise, it recognizes the material reality that these social constructions impose on us. Despite our best efforts we learn norms of racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized behavior as children through observation and imitation of the adults to whom we are exposed, whether directly or virtually through the media. Although we live in a nation with a strong commitment to individual freedom, these norms interact to produce a web of patterned rewards for norm-conforming behavior and punishments for behavior that doesn’t. While we might want that patterned reward system in place for certain criminal justice purposes (such as preventing rape, domestic violence, or murder), extending them beyond that domain socializes Americans into an acceptance of injustice and discrimination. Think of these intersecting behavioral norms as analogous to the threat that Morpheus and Neo discuss when they first meet in the movie *The Matrix*:

*Morpheus:* Do you believe in fate, Neo?

*Neo:* No.

*Morpheus:* Why not?

*Neo:* Because I don’t like the idea that I’m not in control of my life.

*Morpheus:* I know exactly what you mean. Let me tell you why you’re here. You’re here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain. But you feel it. You’ve felt it your entire life. That there’s something wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is